The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 24
Issue 1 *March - Special Issue on Asian American Experiences*

Article 3

March 1997

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Asian Americans are not immune to poverty and its consequences. This paper has reviewed several poverty-related concepts and theories and examined their relevance for understanding and dealing with poverty among Asian Americans. Social work interventions are proposed at both macro and micro levels together with the professional skills necessary for those interventions.

Even in our affluent country, poverty abounds and affects people of all races, colors and cultures. Asian Americans are no exception. They are not immune to poverty and its consequences. Asian Americans are the third largest racial and ethnic minority in the country. Despite differences in the cultures of the lands of their origin and the degree of acculturation, most Asian Americans share some common values and world views that set them apart from the majority community and rest of the population. Like other minorities, they suffer from racism and other disadvantages of being a minority. They also have an added disadvantage—that of invisibility. They have tended to struggle with their problems themselves without much help from the society at large and thereby, earned the title of "model minority". A model minority is conceived as one that has successfully overcome its social handicaps and one that does not require special attention and aid. This makes their poverty particularly painful because no one knows it exists.

In terms of the demographics, let us see who Asian Americans are. In a recent report on the Asian and Pacific Islander Population in the United States, Bennett (1992) has compared Asian Americans with the White population. Some of the highlights of that report are:

Asian American population is younger than the White population with its median age being 30.4 years compared with 33.9 of the White population.

Among persons 25 years old and over, the percentage of Asian Americans with 4 years of high school or more is slightly higher than that for White population (82 versus 80).

The proportion (39%) of Asian Americans 25 and over who had completed 4 or more years of college is almost twice the proportion (22%) for Whites.

Despite these pluses, in 1991, (1) the labor force participation rate for Asian Americans 16 years old and over (64%) was lower than that of White population (66%); (2) the per capita income of Asian Americans ($13,420) was lower than that of Whites ($15,270); and (3) a larger proportion (11%) of Asian American than of White families (8%) were below poverty.

Other reports on the specific Asian American groups reveal a similar picture. For example, Gold and Kibria (1993) assessed the economic situation of Vietnamese refugees and concluded that far from a success story, the economic status of these is characterized by unstable, minimum-wage employment and welfare dependency.

How do we explain poverty among people who are eager to work, who believe in the American dream of success, wealth and happiness, and who are willing to make the needed efforts to realize that dream? We will examine the various poverty-related concepts and theorist for an understanding of poverty among Asian Americans and draw from them ideas for dealing with it.

What Is Poverty?

There is no universally accepted definition of poverty. Even defining it is difficult. Some would deny the reality of poverty and thereby avoid the task of defining it. They go to the extent of calling poverty as "a pseudo-concept, the invention of social scientists and humanitarian liberals" (Hartman, 1984, p. 3). Others take a subjective view of poverty. According the them a person is poor only if he/she feels poor. For them poverty is as much a state of mind as it is a state of one's pocketbook. "The Kentucky backwoodsman is sometimes seen not as impoverished but as

enjoying the rich benefits of a bountiful and uncluttered natural world. He is not to be pitied, but rather idealized. To lift him out of financial destitution would be to corrupt him" (Schiller, 1984, p. 10). Poverty is also a relative concept. Those considered poor at one time in a country's history may not be viewed as poor at another time. The poor in one country may not appear to be poor when compared with the poor in another land. We may say that the poor are poor in relation to the dominant, richer middle class but there is a looseness about this definition as well. The Council of Economic Advisors has defined poverty as the inability to satisfy minimum needs. The poor are those whose resources—their income from all sources, together with their asset holdings—are inadequate to meet those needs (Sneden, 1970). However, there can be divergence of views about what the minimum needs are.

Money has been used to determine the presence and extent of poverty on the assumption that most of the indices of poverty can be reduced to monetary figures. A monetary figure is used as the "cutting point," "a poverty line" for separating the poor from the non-poor. The poverty index developed by Mollie Orshansky of the Social Security Administration in 1963 is the most widely used standard for the purpose. This index is based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's measure of the cost of temporary, low budget, nutritious diet of households of various sizes. The poverty index is this food budget multiplied by three, reflecting the fact that food typically represents one-third of a low income family's expenses. The resulting figure is the minimum income needed to buy a subsistence level of goods and services. The people whose incomes fall below the index are considered poor (Orshansky, 1965). Over the years, there has been considerable sophistication of this poverty index but it is still far from a perfect measure of poverty. This approach does help to determine who the poor are but does not go beyond that.

Segalman and Basu (1981) have talked about levels of poverty and categorized the poor into three groups—*transitional poor, marginal poor,* and *residual poor.* The *transitional poor* are experiencing poverty temporarily because of a brief spell of unemployment, expensive medical problem, legal litigation or some other circumstance. They climb out of poverty sooner or later and become self-sufficient. The *marginal poor* are economically marginal. They

earn just enough to meet their basic needs. A down-turn in the national employment picture or a family mishap throws them into dependency. Some climb out but others stay in poverty. Most of the "working poor" fall in this group. The *residual poor* stay in poverty and for most of them poverty is a transgenerational experience. They are governmentally supported through welfare programs such as AFDC.

What Are the Theories of Poverty?

Segalman and Basu (1981) have presented four theories of society (structural-functional [consensus] theory, exchange theory, conflict theory, and interactionist theory) and discussed how each of those theories provides a different perspective on why this society creates/tolerates poverty in the midst of plenty and how it has sought to deal with it.

The *consensual theory* views society as self-balancing, self-regulating, boundary-maintaining, and self-sufficient. It strives to maintain a homeostasis of relationships among its systems and subsystems and the individuals therein. The poor are the outsiders who are unable or unwilling to enter the system. The *exchange theory* explains society in terms of the societal components and individuals entering into and completing meaningful exchanges. Social transactions occur because each actor hopes to gain something from the other. The poor lack either the "what" and "how" of potential exchanges or tradable skills or opportunities to effect meaningful exchanges. The *conflict theory* assumes that individuals' interest can be served only by encroaching on the interests of others. Those with more power will coerce those with less power into accepting bargains that are not fair trade of goods or services. Poor are the powerless who are exploited by others. According to the *interactionist theory* the nature of the transactions between/among people is not as important as the meaning attached by them to those transactions—i.e. one's own actions as well as others'. Social organization results from behavior patterns that evolve from attempts to achieve goals perceived to be desirable. A fully functional person has "a broad spectrum of well-understood roles, role behaviors, norms, symbols, and role equipment" (Segalman & Basu, 1981, p. 43). The poor lack these

attributes. These perspectives on poverty suggest different approaches for intervention to be utilized by helpers with different identities and roles. In the words of Segalman and Basu (1981),

> The consensualist policy promotes corrections, psychotherapy, and social control personnel; the exchange theory orientation, vocationalrehabilitation and rehabilitative welfare workers; the conflict theorist, defenders and trainers of self-defense; and the interactionist, education to prevent confusion and misunderstanding" (p. 48).

Besides these general theories of society reflecting different perspectives on poverty, there are theories of poverty based on economic, social and cultural phenomena on the one hand and psychological attributes of the poor on the other. Therefore, according to one set of these theories, the understanding of the "why" of poverty lies in the forces—economic, social and cultural —operating outside the poor, over which they have no control. According to the other set of these theories, the explanation of poverty is to be found in the variables within and around the poor over which they may have some control. There are two extreme perspectives on the cause of poverty—the *Restricted Opportunity* and the *Flawed Character* arguments respectively. The first blames the society for the poverty of the poor and the second holds that the poor are poor because of individual defects in aspiration, ability, motivation or work ethics. There are several variations on these two themes depending on the perspective—radical, conservative and liberal—of various theorists.

The *Restricted Opportunity* is viewed as resulting from the faults in the economy. Sheldon Danziger blames the high rate of poverty today on the failure of the economy since 1973 (Pear, 1993). "No matter how poverty is measured, the decline in poverty that began in the sixties slowed and then stopped in the seventies; since 1978, the numbers below the poverty level have steadily risen" (Ehrenreich, 1986, p. 86). Labor market forces create and contribute to poverty in many ways. They determine not only the demand for labor but also the worth of human capital characteristics, the skills and abilities that individuals bring to the labor market. Hence we have people who cannot finds jobs because there are none; others who suffer intermittent periods of employment and unemployment; and still others who work

full-time year around but do not earn enough to pull themselves out of poverty. These market forces are largely controlled by the few at the top into whose hands the country's wealth is concentrated. Most of the capital is owned by corporations, banks, insurance companies, and pension trusts and the nature of these entities has changed over the years.

> Many U.S.-owned corporations no longer are U.S. corporations, and investment in them does not mean investment in the United States. Multinational corporations have no allegiance to any country, although they maintain bases in one, and they avoid paying taxes to the United States or reinvesting in their U.S.-based factories to increase jobs. As American jobs are lost, so is purchasing power, pushing the economy downward (Day, 1989, p. 230).

Moreover, the various statuses of the poor—as being out of the labor force, unemployed, or underemployed—are dependent on the forces of aggregate demand which emanate from the decisions made regrading the utilization of the society's economic resources.

> Fiscal and monetary policies largely determine the number of available jobs. Because these policies are the outcome of conscious activity on the part of a federal administration and not autonomously formulated by an invisible hand, we may say that the level of unemployment is part of society's matrix of goals (Schiller, 1984, p. 57).

Who determines society's goals? The search for the answer to this question points to another theory, the elite theory, which can thus be treated as another theory of poverty.

The *elite theory* states that (1) American society is divided into two groups: the few who rule and the many who are ruled; (2) elites are disproportionately drawn from upper socioeconomic groups, are better educated and with better skills of communication, and are primarily WASP males; (3) new members are accepted into the inner circle only if they have the "right" characteristics and accept the basic legitimacy of the elite rule; (4) elites share a consensus about certain rules of the game, the key rule being that the elite system is legitimate and must be maintained; (5) public policy, the decisions made by elites in the form of legislation, most usually reflects the values of elites and not the demands of the public, and changes in public policies reflect changes in

elite values more often than citizen wishes; and (6) public is largely apathetic, ill-informed and passive. Elites control public information and democratic symbols and can generally manipulate nonelites to accept their policies and prerogatives (Dye & Pickering, 1978). Our political leaders generally do not come from the poor or the blue collar or even the low-income white collar groups. Power, thus, is in the hands of the people who are not accountable to the poor and who consider programs for assisting the poor as destroyers of incentives for work and economic self-sufficiency. These political realities also contribute substantially to poverty.

The *Flawed Character* argument pervades the various *cultural* and *racial theories of poverty*. These theories hold that the poor are poor because of their cultural and/or racial inferiority. They have patterns of behavior and values characteristically different from those of the dominant society. These patterns of behavior and values are believed to be transmitted intergenerationally through socialization and become determinants of the poverty of the poor (Waxman, 1983). This *culture of poverty* is marked by a lack of aspirations and motivation to get ahead with the result that the poor have nothing or little human capital to bring to the labor market. The culture-of-poverty poor may not be "psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime" (Oscar Lewis as quoted by Waxman, 1983). The Flawed Character argument not only explains poverty but also justifies the privileges of the non-poor.

Theories explaining poverty in terms of the deficiencies of the poor are based on the prejudices of the non-poor against the poor. A less prejudiced view is provided by the Situational perspective which holds that the poor behave differently not because they possess their own unique value system but because they have internalized the dominant societal values but do not have the opportunity to realize these through socially sanctioned avenues.

Waxman (1983) has examined *poverty as a stigma* and says that the situation of the poor is determined not only by societal conditions and opportunities but "also by the interpretations given to them by both the poor and non-poor, and this is inexorably linked with the stigma of poverty" (Waxman, 1983, p. 100). This stigma

attributes to the poor a status of being "less than human." The stigma of poverty, he claims, explains what the culturists and the situationalists have not considered, the possibility that the stigma results in the isolation of the poor from the material as well as cultural provisions of the society. As a result of the stigmatization and isolation of the poor, "there is a somewhat less than successful internalization of any cultural system" (Waxman, 1983, p. 98).

Racial discrimination in the labor market is another element of the economic reality. Minority workers are denied entrance or full use of their productive abilities with the result that their earnings are low and they are heavily represented in the ranks of the poor. Past and present discrimination results in occupational, employment and wage disparities all of which lead to disparities in earnings (Schiller, 1984). Discrimination in the labor market takes many forms. Some employers willfully exclude minority workers, others rely on recruitment procedures that result in their exclusion, still others do not hire them because of the doubts about their capabilities, notions of what kind of work is "proper" for them, and the fear of employee and community disapproval. "The cumulative impact of these practices is evident: Members of minority or poor populations end up working less often, for fewer hours, at less attractive jobs—and, ultimately, for less income" (Schiller, 1984, p. 162).

Of all these theories of poverty, most Americans tend to believe the ones that hold the poor responsible for their poverty. According to Rodgers (1979),

> Rather than accept the fact that poverty in this country results primarily from racism, sexism, and a scarcity of genuine opportunity, many attempt to delude and comfort themselves with the belief that the poor are the victims of their own weaknesses. Elaborate myths about the poor are perpetuated by the mass media, written into textbooks, and transmitted from one generation to the next" (p. 209).

These observations have a lot of validity even today.

Like every other social problem, poverty is too complex a phenomenon to be adequately explained by any one theory. Nevertheless, despite providing a limited and biased view of the reality, every theory has an element of truth in it. Hence, ideas must be

drawn from all of these theories for effective strategies to deal with the problem.

Theories of Poverty and Poverty Among Asian Americans

Looking at the poor Asian Americans by the level of poverty classification, it appears that most of them fall in the transitional group and the others in the marginal group. They do not share most of the attributes of the residual or chronic poor. This does not make their suffering any less real but does provide even to the marginal poor among them a brighter ray of hope. "It is with such families that a continued period of employment, a rising level of expectations, and a willingness to invest in themselves and their children's education, will help them into secure self-sufficiency" (Segalman & Basu, 1981, p. 11).

Economic theories of poverty have as much relevance to the situation of the Asian American poor as it does to that of all other poor in the country. These suggest that the economy needs to improve and job opportunities at all levels need to be created and expanded so that there is a demand for workers with all kinds of skills.

The *elite theory* points out the preeminence of elites in the society and the need for educating and influencing them in the fight against poverty.

The theories of poverty based on cultural and racial phenomena seem more powerful in explaining the plight of the Asian American poor. They are among the last to be hired and first to be fired; they are often employed in positions where their educational and experiential assets are ignored or devalued; their lack of language facility (in case of first generation immigrants) is generalized to all dimensions of their ability; and the stereotypical view of the poor is imposed on them with the result that negative qualities are attributed to them and then those negative attributes are used to treat them negatively. These theories are based on the prejudices of the non-poor against the poor. The solution lies in efforts directed at changing attitudes and attitudes-dictated environments, and letting the larger society know the costs of discrimination.

Some of the *culture of poverty* explanations also yield ideas that have relevance to the situation of the Asian American poor

as well. Distrust of authority, resignation to the existing situation as fated, tendency for submission, little access to sources of information, lack of verbal facility, and political invisibility are some the factors that contribute to the poverty of Asian Americans. The elimination or modification of these factors must be built into the approaches for intervention with them.

Approaches to Poverty Among Asian Americans

Since poverty is a multi-causal phenomenon, it requires a multi-pronged approach involving both macro and micro interventions. Social workers and social service agencies concerned about the poor Asian Americans should have a dual focus addressing the basic causes of poverty as well as the needs of its victims, and build into their interventions insights provided by the theories of poverty discussed above. As a macro issue, poverty in the United States reflects the political priorities of the county, the biases and deficiencies of its political and economic systems, and the extent to which the elites have become the victims of their own efforts to miseducate the public about economic and political realities (Rodgers, 1979). At the macro level, therefore, social work intervention must be multi-fold with its thrust on influencing the elites and educating the general public for economic and social changes. Important issues and strategies can include the following.

1. In view of the global nature of the American economy and its need for repair, social workers should start thinking globally and shift to what Day (1989) calls "an activist mode that is attuned to social action and social change" (p. 232). They should add their voice to the demand for strengthening the economy of the country through the creation of jobs both in the public and private sectors. Unemployment and underemployment are not only unessential to a healthy economy but quite dysfunctional (Rodgers, 1979). Day (1989) has suggested a number of approaches to limiting the baneful activities of multinational corporations such as (1) reducing capital allowances allowed to corporations, (2) taxing all corporations more equitably, (3) ensuring that prices are not raised to pass costs on to consumers, (4) making the corporations that move out compensate the nation for the cost of their departure, and (5) treating them as if they were nation-states. These approaches

are not likely to be adopted unless the elite change their attitudes and/or are compelled to do so.

2. Social workers should become active contributors to the efforts for reforming the country's welfare system. The system needs to become more efficient and responsive in terms of meeting the immediate needs of the poor, giving them aspirations beyond the here and now, and helping them get out of poverty. This should happen at all levels from national to local. After reviewing the contemporary strategies for fighting poverty, Atherton (1992) has suggested programs for improving the housing situation of the chronically poor families and the healthcare and overall conditions of the working poor. Social workers in other communities can further test the efficacy of such programs and make the lessons learned from these experiences a part of their repertoire of knowledge and skills. O'Donnell (1993) has described a program that involved clients in the problem formulation, policy and program development, and implementation of a welfare-to-work effort. Social workers with agencies exclusively or extensively serving Asian Americans can emulate and adapt such approaches.

3. Social workers should make efforts to eliminate the stigma of poverty while avoiding the "blaming" game. "(T)he poor cannot be blamed for they are the subjects of stigmatization, and the non-poor cannot be blamed for the stigmatization which has deep roots in the country's cultural history" (Waxman, 1983, p. 70). Reducing the isolation of the poor and increasing their integration into the larger society would lead to the elimination of the stigma of poverty. Social workers should work toward a culture of inclusiveness—economically and politically as well as socially. This should "involve the creation and expansion of services and income maintenance that are available to all members of the society, thus affording the non-poor a basis for identifying with and seeing self-interest in these changes" (Waxman, 1983, p. 128). Isolation along with self-centeredness and insecurity creates what Mohan (1988) calls ethnophobia, a kind of negative consciousness of the kind which leads to intraethnic group conflict and demoralization. In the case of Asian Americans this breaks their ethnic support system and saps its strength.

4. Social workers should work on educating the society at large about the *myths* regarding the poor and their responsibility

for their poverty, the damage that these myths are doing, and the costs of discrimination. In the words of Schiller (1984),

> Where discrimination against minorities is pervasive, society as a whole loses potential human capital. The abilities and creativity of the minority communities remain underdeveloped. Hence, total output of goods and services is less than it would be in the absence of discrimination. Estimates of the size of this loss run into tens of billions of dollars a year. In addition, much of the output we do produce is directed to relatively unattractive uses such as the surveillance of homes, street, jails, and welfare case loads (p. 131).

Social workers are well suited to play leadership roles in the task of breaking these myths. They deal with the poor and get to closely observe the reality of their poverty. They can show to the larger society how poverty is the cause of many social problems by constantly feeding the media with correct and graphic facts on the lives of the poor from the data collected in the process of work with these clients. This is likely to have many other positive side-effects as well.

> The benefits for clients may consist of a reduced sense of guilt, an improved self-esteem, renewed energy and even a greater consciousness about their conditions. For pressure groups functioning in the community, the information conveyed by social workers on their clients' poverty would help those groups to work more effectively in lobbying for changes in social policy (Larochelle & Campfens, 1992, p. 110).

Social workers working with Asian Americans should help in the projection of an image of Asian Americans as hardworking, honest and loyal Americans despite their non-white features and accented English. These efforts need to be directed at the larger society of today as well as of tomorrow through the media of mass communication and school systems. Efforts to help children in schools to understand racism and discrimination and their ill-effects on everyone need to be further strengthened. Teachers, administrators and counselors can be sensitized and involved as leaders in a movement toward a more humanistic society. Teaching of history can become inclusive and incorporate the contributions of minorities to the development of the country.

This is important because the standard textbooks generally either fail to mention Asian Americans or do not portray their role in American history in a balanced and comprehensive manner.

In communities with large Asian American populations, social workers can teach Asian Americans what their rights are and how the political system works; identify and educate Asian American leaders, help them organize their communities and build coalitions with others; assist Asian Americans to become politically visible and sources of influence on the elites; and involve them as advisors, consultants, and members of policy making bodies in order to make the services of human service agencies more appropriate, acceptable and effective. For meeting the needs of Asian American clients effectively, this author has elsewhere discussed organizational arrangement for a multi-purpose social service agency which is simultaneously client-concerned and community-oriented (Dhooper, 1991).

At the micro level also, social work efforts have to be manifold.

1. Social workers should help Asian American clients feel pride in their culture and its positive aspects such as the importance of the family for the individual's well-being, progress and happiness; importance of education as the passport to enlightenment and better economic status; self-control; and religious faith.

2. They should help Asian American clients acquire or regain faith in the political and legal system of the country and learn how to make the system work for oneself.

3. They should help these clients retain hope and maintain their morale despite their discouraging experiences and belief in the force of fate. "When appropriate leadership roles are denied, when responsibility is not backed by authority, when educational and experiential skills are not adequately compensated, and when there is en ever-present job insecurity, loss of morale is unavoidable" (Dhooper, 1991, p. 68).

4. They should help them reduce the sense of powerlessness by (a) teaching them language and interpersonal communication skills, (b) acquainting them with the American problem-solving skills, and (c) helping them acquire marketable skills, and (d) assisting them in expanding and strengthening their social support systems.

Social Work Skills Needed for These Interventions

Social work skills appropriate for intervention with Asian Americans are both generic and special. At the macro level, the worker should use the community organizational and group skills for educating and empowering the Asian Americans on the one hand, and lobbying and influencing those in politically and economically powerful positions on the other.

At the micro level, skills involved in culturally sensitive casework both with individuals and families would be appropriate. Models of culturally sensitive practice are appearing in the social work literature. Acknowledging one's own prejudices and biases and considering one's clients as culturally equal are necessary for this type of practice.

Social workers working with Asian Americans may find the following observations helpful in acquiring and refining other appropriate skills.

Most Asian Americans are not likely to seek social work help on their own. Those who have been here for generations are used to fend themselves, turn inward for strength and/or seek solace and support from their families, those who are new may not know of and/or feel comfortable in asking for help. For many Asian Americans new to this country social work is an alien concept. In the countries of their origin social work establishment—social workers and social service system—does not exist. Moreover, taking one's problems outside the family is a taboo. These people must be reached out to in creative ways that address both the culturally-created barriers and practical difficulties of disadvantaged individuals. In these efforts, the status and importance of the man of the household should be recognized and respected. It would be wise to acquire the appropriate outreach skills for effective work with Asian Americans. Dhooper and Tran (1987) have summarized techniques found to be effective in casework with Asian American clients.

Since powerlessness of Asian Americans is pervasive and is experienced at several levels—individual, interpersonal, organizational, institutional, and societal—both individually and collectively, their empowerment has to be the guiding principle of social work practice with Asian Americans. There are several empowerment strategies relevant for both micro and macro level

of practice. Hirayama and Cetingok (1988) have recommended the provision of four sets of resources for the empowerment of Asian Americans: (1) knowledge about where and how to secure needed basic necessities such as money, job, house, health care and education, (2) knowledge about civil, political, and legal system as well as American methods of problem solving, (3) attitudes and behavior or interpersonal skills effective in dealing with social systems and organizations, and (4) social support system within and outside one's ethnic community. Evans (1992) has included skill building, the enhancement of feelings of self-efficacy, and consciousness raising as the major processes which facilitate empowerment. Social workers should master the techniques involved in these processes. Overall, they should use their creativity in dealing with the problem of poverty among Asian Americans both at the macro and micro levels reminding themselves that creating newer roles is as much their professional responsibility as is playing the assigned roles. New roles emerge from analyzing human problems from different perspectives and broadening the scope of those analyses. Ideas discussed in this paper may help in doing so.

This paper has analyzed poverty among Asian Americans from various theoretical perspectives, proposed approaches to dealing with that poverty at both macro and micro levels, and discussed the appropriate social work skills.

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